



The Effects of the Unified Sports Basketball Program on Special Education Students' Self-Concepts: Four Students' Experiences

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A Case Study Published in

TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus

Volume 5, Issue 1, September 2008

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Abstract

Unified Sports is Special Olympics' response to the inclusion movement. The program includes both students with disabilities and students without disabilities working together in athletic competitions. We describe 4 students who participated in the program: 3 females and 1 male. The students' disabilities varied and included mobile impairment, traumatic brain injury, and learning disabilities. We administered pre- and post-surveys and conducted one-on-one interviews with these participants upon their completion of their Unified Sports basketball season. Teams learned about and practiced the game of basketball twice a week (during their gym class) and ventured to competitions across Connecticut against other schools. The competitions occurred toward the end of the 6-month program. The Unified Sports basketball program had a positive effect on these students' attitudes. All of the participants verbally expressed highly positive feelings about the program and each of them recommended the program be continued in the future. Social self-concept showed the most significant positive change and physical self-concept showed the least.

Keywords

self-concept, inclusion, Unified Sports, Special Olympics

SUGGESTED CITATION:

Briere, D. E., III, & Siegle, D. (2008). The effects of the Unified Sports basketball program on special education students' self-concepts: Four students' experiences. *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*, 5(1) Article 1. Retrieved [date] from
<http://escholarship.bc.edu/education/tecplus/vol5/iss1/art1>

One concerning issue for educators is extracurricular involvement opportunities for special education students. While mainstreaming has successfully brought increased numbers of special education students into the regular education classroom, very little emphasis has been placed on mainstreaming these students into extracurricular settings. Providing physical extracurricular opportunities where students interact in a positive manner with one another can improve several areas of their self-concept because self-concept is built through students' interaction with their closest environments (Duvdevany, 2002). Unified Sports is one program that incorporates extracurricular inclusion outside the academic classroom for special education students and shows potential for improving students' self-concept. The way individuals see themselves determines how others see them. "For individuals with special needs, they need to see themselves as valuable and in a positive light so that others can see this and provide appropriate assistance and attitudes" (Sze & Valentin, 2007, p. 552).

Unified Sports

While many extracurricular engagements do not embrace or encourage special education student involvement (Cambra & Silvestre, 2003), Unified Sports is the exception. Unified Sports was Special Olympics' response to the inclusion movement. The positive inclusion surge in academic classrooms has left many educators looking to extend the movement beyond the classroom. With the vision of fusing individuals with intellectual disabilities (athletes) with individuals without intellectual disabilities (partners), Special Olym-

pics developed Unified Sports (Malafronte & Hall, 2005; Shapiro, 1991). Unified Sports originated in Massachusetts when a softball team integrated students with intellectual disabilities with participants without such disabilities. This team, created in 1991, became the first team of the now established Unified Sports program (Shapiro; Siperstein & Hardman, 2001). A member with disabilities of the original team, Gus Piazza, reported that his teammates with disabilities "lost their shyness" after a short while as they became comfortable with the team (Shapiro). Following the establishment of this softball team, the first Unified Sports league was held at Dever

State School in Taunton, Massachusetts, utilizing Bridgewater State College students as teammates without disabilities (Siperstein & Hardman). A Special Olympics consensus from 2002 estimated that approximately 32,855 individuals were involved in the Unified Sports program. Recently, the pro-

gram had grown by a noteworthy 22% in only 2 years. With time, this program is predicted to perpetuate even more popularity both nationally and globally.

The program is designed to enhance special education students' social relationships and acceptance from peers (Siperstein & Hardman, 2001). In effect, the program seeks to improve each participant's physical, social, and global self-concepts. Physical self-concept involves students' beliefs about their ability to participate in sports and outdoor activities. How well students believe they are able to relate to other people, including their peers, is their social self-concept. Global self-concept tends to cover their overall general feeling of self-worth. People hold different

What is Self-Concept?
How individuals perceive themselves, either positively or negatively in different contexts of life, create their self-concept.

views of themselves in different contexts of life (Asci, 2002; Elbaum & Vaughn, 2001; Marsh & Hau, 2003). For example, students can have a high or positive feeling about their athletic ability and a low or negative feeling about their social standing or academic ability. Self-concept emerges from a complex interaction between the capabilities of the individual, the social environment in which self-evaluations occur, and cognitive development, which governs the type and scope of information people incorporated into their self-definition at any one point in development (Coleman, 1985). The majority of studies on self-concept today focus on this multi-

dimensional model of self-concept. While a unidimensional model was once the dominant model in the field, presently the hierarchical, multi-dimensional approach is the forerunner. The multi-dimensional model was derived from a study by Shavelson, Hubner, and Stanton (1976) and from research that followed (Marsh, 2006; Marsh, Ellis, Parada, Richards, & Heubeck, 2005; Chanal, Marsh, Sarrazin, & Bois, 2005). Unified Sports may have a positive effect on special education students' physical, social, and global self-concepts by improving students' physical abilities in a social environment. The goals of Unified Sports are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Seven Paramount Goals of Unified Sports

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">1) Bring together athletes with and without mental retardation in a setting where all athletes are challenged to improve their skills.2) Provide a valuable sports opportunity to individuals with mental retardation who are not presently involved with Special Olympics; especially those with mild retardation and those in communities where there are not enough athletes to conduct team sports.3) Prepare athletes with higher-level skills for participation in school or community sports.4) Increase public awareness of the spirit and skills of individuals with mental retardation.5) Enable Special Olympics athletes' siblings to participate as team members or coaches on Unified Sports teams.6) Enable athletes to develop friendships and an understanding of each other's capabilities through a spirit of equality and team unity.7) Enhance each athlete's self-esteem. (Unified Sports Guidebook, as cited in Siperstein et al., 2001, p. 3) |
|---|

The Unified Sports program combines approximately equal numbers of Special Olympics athletes with peer athletes on sports teams for training and competition (Siperstein & Hardman, 2001). Unified Sports includes a variety of indoor and outdoor sporting events

from which to choose. Basketball, bowling, golf, softball, and volleyball are the common sports that provide a broad range of Unified Sports activities to meet most students' personal needs. For each sporting event, 8 weeks of training are required prior to participating

in any official competitions (Malafronte & Hall, 2005).

The basketball event allows a maximum of 12 players on one team. Furthermore, 50% of the team must be members without a disability. Both males and females can play on the same team, and students who have played on a junior varsity or varsity high school basketball team may not participate. During the game there must be two players without a disability and three players with a disability on the court at all times. Teams wear uniforms and sneakers and follow regular high school basketball rules, with a few exceptions. Players may shuffle their feet or take an extra step when catching the basketball without being penalized. Five levels of play are offered, contingent upon the severity of disabilities in team members. In levels four and five no score is kept during the game (Malafronte & Hall, 2005).

Previous Research

Siperstein and Hardman investigated the attitudes of those involved in the Unified Sports program in 2001. The state directors who were involved in the study placed equal importance on the Special Olympics and the Unified Sports program, citing the need to provide consistency for program participants. The state directors also stated that the Unified Sports program had greater potential for growth than the Special Olympics. The Siperstein and Hardman study found different regulations and rules from state to state as well as varying team habits. Some teams remained socially active between events (i.e., participants with and without disabilities ate and spent free time together). Other teams'

members only associated with their teammates during competitions. Bowling, basketball, softball, and volleyball were the favorite sports offered by the program.

Ninety percent of participants with disabilities indicated that they wished to continue their participation the following year as they worked well with all the members on their team. Ninety-eight percent of these participants also reported an increase in their skill level in their specified sport and enjoyed the regularly held practices. Participants without disabilities reported the competitions to be moderately to very competitive (91%) and enjoyed the time they spent with their teammates (99%). Negative findings were limited with 30% of the participants with disabilities reporting they did not feel they were getting enough playing time. Twenty-one percent of participants also reported not liking the practices.

The data supports Unified Sports success at improving participants' social relationships with peers. By participating in the program, participants' physical abilities inevitably increase. With increased social interactions and physical abilities it can be expected that participants' physical self-concept may become more positive along with their social self-concepts, and ultimately their global self-concepts. Families involved in the Siperstein study reported improvements in their students' physical abilities, self-esteem/self-confidence, and relationships with peer athletes and peers at school. The athletes' favorite part of the competition was the social aspect. Unified Sports appear to have a positive effect on participants on multiple levels and is a beneficial branch of Special Olympics for families and students at the local level.

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The Story of Four Students

We recently interviewed 4 high school students who were in a special education class and participated in Unified Sports. They included 3 females and 1 male. We gathered information with pre- and post-test self-concept surveys and individual post interviews. This approach provided a comprehensive and multi-layered view into the participants' person; their straightforward and unambiguous opinions relayed via the surveys were followed by one-on-one interviews covering their perspectives, abilities, and sometimes elaborate feelings about the Unified Sports basketball program.

Student 1: Sandy

Sandy was an outgoing and social student. Every interaction with her was a cooperative one and nothing but willingness and concerned thought went into all her responses. The only time Sandy exhibited somewhat apprehensive and nervous emotions was during the one-on-one interview. Her responses were often very brief (one or two words); however, when verbally prompted, Sandy would elaborate on her responses about the program.

Initially, Sandy appeared more nervous than usual (looking at the ground and rocking herself a little); however, once the interview progressed she became more comfortable and fluid with her thoughts. Sandy felt that the Unified Sports program helped her with the interactions she had with her peers during the school day. She also enjoyed the competitions and "meeting people from all backgrounds." Not surprisingly, as Sandy excelled with peer-to-peer interactions, the socialization factor appeared to be the most appealing aspect of the program for her. Her friendships and peer relationships had im-

proved from the start to finish of the program. When asked if she felt more popular now, Sandy simply said "Yes, with everybody." She also mentioned that the program had improved her athletic ability; specifically, she felt faster and "stronger in the arms" at the end of the program.

When asked if she would recommend the program be continued in the future, Sandy said it should since it "brings everyone together." She elaborated, stating that by "everyone" she meant people with and without disabilities. Her favorite part of the program was winning as she gracefully admitted her team won a lot. While she disliked the rigorous running drills during practice, better known as "suicides," Sandy still frequently recommended the program to her peers. Her prime reason for such recommendations: equality among individuals. Sandy repeatedly emphasized the socialization factor of the program throughout the interview, stating that now the majority of the school population recognized her for her active role in Unified Sports. As a result, Sandy better understood the game of basketball, as well as the dedication and commitment that went into improving in a team sport.

Through the interview, Sandy noted that she felt stronger and faster; her physical self-concept appeared to have improved the most as a result of her involvement in the Unified Sports program. The interview provided strong verbal support for the program and what it has to offer student with challenges.

Student 2: Karen

Of the 4 students, Karen was the most introverted. She often separated from the group with minimal peer-to-peer interactions. Karen kept mostly to herself; however, she was very cooperative. Surprisingly, this stu-

dent appeared to be less nervous during the one-on-one interview than her more outgoing counterparts. The interview began with elaborate, detailed responses, but by the conclusion they turned short and static. The duration of the interview could have contributed to Karen's sparse answers towards the end of the interview. Physically, Karen was slightly overweight and may have felt unsure about her physical abilities.

Karen was primarily positive, shining further light on the positive effects the Unified Sports basketball program had on student's global, social, and physical self-concepts. For instance, the program favorably helped introverted Karen in strengthening her social self-concept. She mentioned that she enjoyed meeting new friends via the program. Karen also discussed how the program had helped with her peer-to-peer interactions at her high school. After partaking in the program, she said she knew more people and felt she was more a part of the school community because her peer relationships had improved. Not only were Karen's social borders expanded, but her pre-existing friendships became stronger as well. Two of Karen's "best friends" were in the program and during the program Karen mentioned that "Sandy (the first student described) called [her] like every night almost." The socialization factor was Karen's favorite part of the program as it made her feel more connected to her school.

In regards to her physical ability, Karen said she "felt a little better, but about the same." She enjoyed running in practices, but felt her endurance did not show great improvement. It is possible that Karen's in-

vovement in the Unified Sports program made her more self-aware of her physical limitations, thus demonstrating a potential negative of this program. Aside from this point, Karen still said she would recommend the program to friends and future students. Simply put, "its fun [and you] learn a lot how to play" the game. Although not all three domains drastically changed, two of the three (global and social self-concept) did show improvements, thus demonstrating the universal and multi-faceted positive effects which can come from such a program as Unified Sports even for students who do not consider themselves athletic.

Student 3: Sally

Where Karen was the most introverted student in the group, Sally was the most extroverted. From the moment we first met, she was outgoing and continually holding peer-to-peer and peer-to-adult conversations. Sally had suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI), therefore limiting her physical abilities and often leading to her surprising quirky anecdotes. She tended to say what was on her mind and held nothing back. Sally also has a seemingly continuous smile on her face and was excited to talk about Unified Sports.

It cannot be emphasized enough how outgoing Sally was. This led to some surprising verbiage on responses and some intricate and specific thoughts on some questions. When asked what she enjoyed about the program, Sally said she enjoyed seeing her coach every day because "she's a pretty nice, all around great gal." This response demonstrated the social relationship forming aspect of the program. Sally seemed to heavily favor

Unified Sports can act as a vehicle to teach students with disabilities about their conditions and the program can promote a healthier physical self-concept.

the social aspect of the program, both with her coach and her teammates, as she admitted to her presently stronger peer relationships. Sally formed an especially close bond with Heather, a partner in the program (non-special education student), who helped Sally maneuver around the court. Furthermore, Sally felt more popular with “sporty kids” or athletically oriented students after participating in Unified Sports. The program helped her feel better about her athletic abilities. She said that after the program had concluded she felt that she belonged more and felt “less like a misfit.”

Sally credited the program for improving her physical abilities, specifically her ability to run more efficiently. The program also developed her basketball awareness and the skills of ball handling and shooting. Sally suggested that the program be continued as it “helps build up kids’ egos and self-confidence.” When asked how the program had influenced her remaining time in high school, Sally said that the program made her look forward to school on Mondays and Tuesdays when practices were held. This was Sally’s first team sport experience, and she described it as being simply great, “The coach was great, being a part of a team was great, traveling to kick other teams butts was so great, and the free food was great!” Her least favorite part of the program was the end; however, she now felt more confident about basketball and enjoyed playing it during her spare time. Sally ended the program with nothing but positive feelings towards Unified Sports.

Student 4: Aaron

Aaron was a skinny framed male, who stood no taller than 5 feet, 6 inches. He persistently portrayed himself as a shy and quiet individual. A cooperative young man, Aaron

participated continually and put forth full effort. Portraying himself as more passive than opinionated, his responses had potential for neutrality. Aaron was very timid during his introduction; however by the time the one-on-one interview came, he had warmed up and provided in-depth responses. These responses greatly aided in understanding the effects the Unified Sports program had on his three domains of self-concept.

Because the socialization factor was highlighted by other students as the most favorable part of the program, we explored it first with Aaron. Socially, Aaron felt that after the program he talked more to peers on a regular basis. He also made a strong connection with his partner without a disability, whom he felt was “nice and helpful.” When asked if he felt more popular upon the completion of the program, Aaron said he did with “generally everyone.” Interacting and socializing with peers was illuminated once again by Aaron as one of the strengths of this program.

Physically, Aaron felt more skilled in the game of basketball and stronger at the end of the Unified Sports program. Specifically, his defensive play in basketball had improved as he admitted he was always “right up in the dude’s face.” One negative aspect that Aaron mentioned about the program was missing work hours which left him with less money because his commitment to the program required some extracurricular time. Any extracurricular activity does require some out-of-school time on the part of the participant, therefore this potential negative effect of the program does not appear unusual. Although the program did require some commitment on the participant’s part, Aaron did credit the program with helping improve his overall enjoyment of high school. Aaron felt his high school was not the most welcoming environ-

ment at first, but during the Unified Sports program, he said he actually looked forward to coming to school.

Aaron would “definitely” recommend this program to future potential participants as it was “fun and you learn a lot.” He came into the program being a fan of basketball and finished the program as a much improved player. Taking the plethora of positive statements Aaron’s made in support of the Unified Sports program, one would be drawn to the ultimate conclusion that the Unified Sports basketball program had a positive effect on his physical, social, and global self-concepts.

General Conclusions

The findings among students often ran parallel with one another. However, on occasion, different students found the effects of the Unified Sports program to have either a positive or negative impact on their social, physical, or global domains of self-concept. The 4 students enjoyed the Unified Sports program for one reason or another. Each student was infinitely unique when compared to the other 3, thus leading to an individualized experience for each student.

A generalization across the 4 students, regardless of gender or disability, was the socialization benefit the program provided. Two of the four students began the program on the shy side of the social spectrum while the other two were more outgoing. Regardless of this initial character difference, all of the students mentioned their increased sense of socialization in their school on a daily basis. Each of

the students seemed to enjoy the idea of being part of a team. Being recognized throughout the school for their extracurricular involvement with the program appeared to have helped them feel part of the school. Social self-concept was strengthened on all participants’ accounts through the duration of this program.

Across the panel of participants, physical self-concept varied. Participants did admit to feeling stronger and more skilled at the sport of basketball, and they did mention they felt they could run further and shoot the ball better. However, they may have also become more self-aware of their physical limitations. By playing with peers who have no

physical limitations, the participants may have become innately aware of their own physical disabilities. This gained awareness may have led to the scattered physical self-concept findings on the surveys. Through the interviews, each participant verbally suggested a strengthened physical self-concept; however the surveys depicted a different, less positive profile. The programs actual effects on these participants’ physical self-concept cannot be stated with certainty.

The participants’ global self-concept remained the same or slightly increased overall. Since most participants gave very high starting ratings to survey items, there was little room for improvement. Sze and Valenin (2007) noted that “children with disabilities do not necessarily have poor self images, and may have a high self-esteem as a coping method from being seen as different” (p.

***For More Information on
Unified Sports please visit:
http://www.specialolympics.org/Special+Olympics+Public+Website/English/Compete/Unified_Sports/default.htm***

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552). Due to the high pre-survey ceiling on responses, interview responses were weighed more heavily. Across the interviews, all participants mentioned the positive aspects they took away from the program as well as how the program helped them both in and out of school. They felt more popular, stronger, faster, and skilled upon the completion of the program. The only negative mentioned in any of the four interviews was that the program required a time commitment beyond the typical academic day, therefore detracting from work hours.

The interview responses aided and built a strong argument in support of the program with the only potential negative being participants more acute awareness of their physical disabilities brought on as a consequence of practicing with peers who have no disabilities.

Final Thoughts

Students who live with a disability can be taught about physical activity, their own condition, and how it affects their daily lives. Unified Sports can act as a vehicle to teach students with disabilities about their conditions and the program can promote a healthier physical self-concept. Research suggests “schools [should] integrate more extracurricular activities for disabled and non-disabled students to socialize and for disabled students to integrate and develop relationships with other students who share similar disabilities” (Cambra & Silvestre, 2003, p. 205).

The 4 participants described here felt better about themselves socially (with peers) and overall more positive in their day-to-day lives. School became a more welcoming and enjoyable experience for them by the end of the Unified Sports program. School districts must come to understand that many students with disabilities, who do harbor negative self-

concepts about themselves, do so because they perceive themselves as receiving little support (Kloomok & Cosden, 1994). Although school support for students with disabilities has improved over the last decade, Unified Sports can potentially be an additional catalyst for that extra needed social support. The program promotes social interaction, physical activity, and an overall improved sense of accomplishment for students who have previously been offered few extra curricular opportunities.

As Duvdevany noted, “Individuals with disabilities, who experience inclusion, feel more empowered and have more positive self-concepts” (Duvdevany, 2002, p. 427).

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